

# Wissam

Words **AB**

Photo **Courtesy of Wissam**

Meet Wissam Shawkat, currently hailing from Dubai. Wissam is one of the top calligraphic writers and designers in the world. His writing is so remarkable that it's become highly recognized for its unique aesthetic qualities. He's used his calligraphy skills to design everything from stationery to major corporate logos. He can obviously write his name much better than most of us will ever be able to, but the story of how he got there is probably even more impressive.



# Shawkat



**Describe your workspace/office/studio?**

My studio is a simple room, about 3.5m by 5m and is located within my house. It has worktops and a tilted light table, and bookshelves taking a full wall. There are also a couple of cabinets to store tools and inks. I try to keep it clean and tidy as much as I can, as I like to work in an organized environment. However, it's really hard, when I start any artwork or project, things get messy. When it comes to doing a big piece of art, it's always a challenge, due to the limitation of space. Because I do different kinds of jobs, from designs to art, my studio is like my office.

**You're almost completely self-taught, whereas most calligraphers study under masters for years on end. How did this formulate, and how did the conflicts in the Middle East help fine-tune your skill?**

Yes, I did not go through the traditional way of learning calligraphy. I started my obsession with calligraphy at the age of 10 (1984) when my schoolteacher wrote some letters using chalk on the blackboard. That was enough for me to be captured all my life with the beauty of letters. However, this happiness did not last long. Schools had to stop due to the Iraq-Iran war where my city, Basra, was heavily bombed by missiles. We had to stay in underground shelters for a while till things calmed down before we could go back to school. During these weeks I spent in the shelter, I remember my escape was calligraphy. I was practicing all day long because there was nothing else to do.

After that, I continued seeing my teacher and asked him lots of questions about the tools and some letters, how to write them. However, the situation was getting worse during the war, life was really difficult. We had to run from shelter to shelter, and at the end we had to leave our home. Actually, there was no one left on our street due to the random bombings, so my family had to move to a safer place. We moved north of Iraq to the city of Mosul (1000 km from Basra) in 1987. I remember during the holiday I worked at a sign-making shop so I could save some money to buy books and tools.

There I also attended a summer intensive calligraphy program. I was placed in the beginners



# WE ARE JUST COPYING WHAT WAS DONE HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO.

Opening, **World of Love**

Right, **Installation at Berlin Metro Station**

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class studying Ruq'a. A teacher in the class saw some of my calligraphy writing on my desk in Thu-luth, a more difficult script. The teacher asked who did it for me, they could barely believe I had done it myself, and instantly promoted me to a higher class. By 1988 the war was over, so we returned back to our city and I continued my calligraphy passion.

Later, in 1988, while a high school student, I participated in an exhibition and won the first prize for my city. I traveled six hours by train from Basra to Baghdad, to attend the exhibition award ceremony and collect the prize from the Ministry of Education, who hosted the show. During summers, I worked in a sign-making shop in my city of Basra. I developed a reputation as a good calligrapher, and while in high school was sought after for all sorts of lettering jobs. I was going through the teenagers revolt, and in 1990, the first Gulf war started after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Again, my city of Basra was in the center of this turbulence, so school was off for a long time. Again, my calligraphy was the escape, but this time mixed with other art and graphics activities, from drawing posters, to lettering, designing lo-



gos for my friends with their names, designing skate boards and drawing on them, to drawing portraits, plus calligraphy.

As I was developing as an artist, I also attended college and got a degree in Civil Engineering. The city of Basra in Southern Iraq had no art colleges, and so thinking that civil engineering would help me develop my sense of design and drawing, I entered a program there. Calligraphy saved me many duties during the next phase of my life when I was serving in the Iraqi army. I was called on to make signs and do all sorts of lettering work for my superiors, rather than the usual work of a soldier.

By 1998, I was out of both the university and the army, and ready to begin “real” life. I expected to work as an engineer and got a job at a small engineering firm. I worked for only one month before I quit and started to work in my family’s stationery business. Now, I work doing all the signs for the business, in addition to my growing freelance artwork. This includes airbrush poster design, portraits, fine art airbrush works, graphic design and calligraphy. In 1998, I par-

ticipated in the Baghdad International Calligraphy Festival contributing three pieces of calligraphy that combined writing in classical styles on airbrushed, modern backgrounds. I won an award for my participation, and I sold all three pieces I had. For me that was a big success.

**Although you haven’t learned under a master, you are considered and widely respected as one of the top calligraphers of your profession. Have you taught any students or granted an Ijaza to anyone?**

Yes, I have taught many students, and I still do, but never granted an Ijaza to anyone. See, the Ijaza thing is connected to the traditional way of learning, and since I did not go through that, I don’t think I can do that. Plus, I think Ijaza was like a certificate in the old days which allowed you to work in a job as a calligrapher and nowadays, things are not the same. I want to point out a very important thing here, most people think that a calligrapher who holds the Ijaza is a master calligrapher, when in reality this is not true.



**Script calligraphy is one of the most important forms of art in Islamic Culture. Can you help explain why?**

Calligraphy is considered one of the most important arts in Islamic tradition. It developed from the tradition of writing the Quran and was perfected through the centuries into distinct letterforms and complex design rules.

The art of calligraphy became one of the forms of visual expression because any other representational art was not allowed in the Islamic culture at the time. Now, calligraphy is considered as the most highly regarded and most fundamental element of Islamic art.

**You have been credited with bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary scripture within a lot of your design/calligraphy work. How has it been received by clients, and the public, in and around the UAE?**

It is important, and I always call for the evolving of Arabic calligraphy. When I came to Dubai 12 years ago and started to work with creative and design agencies, most of the people who were involved in these agencies when it came to calligraphy, they had the image of the traditional calligraphy. You look around and you see everything

**MY SOURCE  
OF INSPIRATION  
IS ALMOST EVERY  
BEAUTIFUL  
THING**

Left, Sight & Heart

evolving, but when it came to calligraphy, we were stuck with the traditions and the classical scripts. I believe in order for calligraphy to evolve, it must come from calligraphers themselves, it must come from the people who understand it well. I always believe that to break the rules, you need to understand them first. In 2003, I started a project of developing a new hand calligraphy style script, now called Al Wissam style. The letters have a modern look and feel, yet it's linked to the traditional styles, because it was influenced by four different styles.

In the beginning, I started testing it in many design and logo projects, to see how people would receive it, as it was not what people expect to see when it comes to calligraphy, but still has the essence and DNA of calligraphy. After I was happy with the form of the letters and the connections, I took another step forward and started using it in fine art calligraphy works for galleries and exhibitions. I came to a point that if we continued writing and practicing the traditional styles, then we actually weren't doing anything! We are not participating in an evolutionary process, we are just copying what was done hundreds of years ago.

**Some of your work has been classified as calligraphitti. What is calligraphitti and how do you think your work exemplifies it?**

Although I don't call myself a calligraphitti artist, some of my works could fall in this category. Calligraphitti is a term that came from calligraphy and graffiti, it's simply looking at the written word as an image, as a painting, in my opinion; it's the transfer of the creations of street artists or urban artists into more, fine art gallery pieces. However, some artists whose work has been considered calligraphitti, have never done street art.

Calligraphitti is where calligraphic quality lines are transformed into organic, abstract shapes, which represent a drawing rather than a written word. Dutch calligraphy artist Niels Meulman put it in a nice way as "traditional handwriting with a metropolitan attitude".

**Some might think it's as easy as writing words on paper, but a piece of artwork can take years to complete. Do you mind giving**

# BUT THAT INNER VOICE TOLD ME TO DO IT, AND I DID.

## us a brief detail of the process from start to finish?

My process, is simply similar to any artist I guess. I start with sketches in pencil, and scribbles about composition, text ideas, etc. After that, once I am happy with a certain design or composition, I take a step forward, by starting to write with a calligraphic pen, in order to get the feel of the strokes. Then, I work in layers of tracing paper, using many of them till I perfected the composition and the calligraphy strokes, until I am happy with the final design. This stage could be after 10 layers of tracing paper from the original concept or sketch.

After that, I start to plan the final look of the artwork. I select the colors, paper and the final elements in the artwork, and then the final artwork will be born. Most of the times, I scan and print my final sketch to the actual size of the artwork. I then use it as a guide by going over it in pencil to mark the locations of the strokes, or transfer the design to the final artwork media.

## Give me an idea of how Arabic type is structured. Does it read left to right, top to bottom or can letters be arranged in different structures? How many characters are there, etc? Are your works word and letter fragments, or do they read as full words and sentences?

Arabic type or writing reads right to left. It consists of 28 letters or characters but, here you need to note that the system of Arabic writing is connected, so most of the letters have 3 forms; initial, middle and end. When it comes to the art of calligraphy, we can arrange the words from bottom to top or top to bottom, here I mean full words to be arranged, not letters, as the letters

in the word connect, so it would still read right to left. This connection of the characters and the variation we get from the connection, since each character changes its shape to other forms when connected, gives the Arabic language a special aesthetic and ornamental value. If you look at any letter by itself when it is done in good calligraphy hand, it's like an abstract shape. I was first attracted to these values in the Arabic characters.

In my calligraphy, I work with either full sentences or words, and sometimes just letters, depending on the visual result I want to achieve at the end.

## Is there a general message you'd like to convey with your work?

My approach to calligraphy, as I said before, is completely aesthetic. What's important for me is that the end result of any work I do is something beautiful, something positive, something that, when people see my work it makes them feel good. When it comes to written text, this applies also, the content of what we are writing in our calligraphy is as important as practicing calligraphy itself (except for abstract works that include only beautiful forms of letters). I always like to write what I believe in, what I understand. My source of inspiration is almost every beautiful thing. I like to write something positive, something that has a beautiful meaning, so I can reflect that in my composition and in my design. I can feel it in my calligraphy.

## Have you faced challenges with introducing your work to the Western world?

I actually have the opposite feeling, most of the western people I've met fall in love with Arabic calligraphy the first time, even if they don't understand or cannot read it. They just appreciate the beauty of it. I think they look at it as abstract shapes, so they take it out of its writing context and put it into the form of abstract art.

Right, **The Love Carpet**



# THAT WAS ENOUGH FOR ME TO BE CAPTURED ALL MY LIFE WITH THE BEAUTY OF LETTERS

**You've already worked with tons of clients big and small, and exhibited your work around the world. What's in store for the future? Teaching, more exhibits, client work?**

My plan for the future is to do more art and exhibitions, and less client work. I am not saying I will stop that, but I wish I had more time to do fine art pieces for galleries. I produce a very limited amount of artwork every year because these really take time. I am a very busy person because I do everything by myself. I am a one man show, I communicate with clients, I meet with them, I reply to the e-mails and phone calls, and I produce the work entirely. People who come to me, they come to my name, they come to the quality of my work so, I have to stay like that. I am enjoying it, I'm a free bird.

**You use an airbrush for a lot of your work. How do you mask the lettering so as to not over-spray, and why exactly are you so keen on using an airbrush anyway?**

Using the airbrush was a period I passed through in my artistic career. I used it mainly with geometric forms to create a style of calligraphy, or used it in certain areas to add a visual effect in the background of the work. That was from 1996 – 2000, I am not doing this anymore but, sometimes I use it to just color certain areas in the artwork when I need a very even tone of color.

Yet, there is another side to my airbrush passion, which is the tool itself. I am a collector of the

airbrush, I have one of the biggest collections of airbrushes, from the 19th century till now. I was attracted to the invention, and decided to look into its history, who first invented it and where, and I ended up collecting airbrushes. Now, I have 500+ airbrushes in my collection, and there will be a feature soon about my collection in Airbrush Action Magazine in the USA.

**Do you find yourself still learning new techniques, even today, after decades of writing?**

I never stop learning. Every artwork or project is a learning experience for me. I always look for new techniques, I look at using new materials. I always experiment with calligraphy, trying to create new styles and techniques.

**You've already persevered through far more than most people will ever experience in a lifetime. What's one message you'd personally like to send to the world?**

Sometimes, when I look where I am now, it's like a dream but, I always followed my inner feeling. There was something inside always telling me to, it drives me forward every time I face an obstacle. When I decided to resume my career as an artist and designer in calligraphy, and leave my degree as a civil engineer behind, I remember my parents and family were not happy. Although they encouraged me, and helped me in the beginning, they used to tell me you are dreaming, you are not going to go anywhere with this. But that inner voice told me to do it, and I did. I was starting a new life when I moved to Dubai in 2002, after suffering a lot in Iraq during the sanction from 1990 till the fall of the regime in 2003. It was not easy in the beginning, because that was my first time traveling outside Iraq to a different country. After working for 4 years at a design and branding agency, I faced another challenge. I wanted to work alone, because I wanted to be a free artist. I then had that inner battle to quit the job or not. It was not an easy decision because I have a wife and daughter, but I had to listen to that inner voice again. So, I quit my job and decided to be self-employed, on my own, and that was the best decision I ever made. Now, if there were a single message I would like to tell the world, it would be, "Follow Your Dream." ●